

FRIEZE

Precious Okoyomon's Butterfly Effect

At Sant'Andrea De Scaphis, Rome, the artist instils an apparently bucolic setting with a sinister undertone

BY ANA VUKADIN IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 23 AUG 23



For 'the sun eats her children', Precious Okoyomon has created a gloriously alive yet decaying micro, tropical ecosystem in a deconsecrated, ninth-century church. When I visit Sant'Andrea De Scaphis one early August evening, the air is so humid it almost takes shape. The floor is covered in locally sourced mounds of fertile volcanic soil, now overgrown with moss, ground ivy and lichen. A gravel path winds through shrub-like plants – including Oleander, Bitter Nightshade, Lantana and Angel's Trumpet – united by their toxic properties, which range from mild to deadly. Subverting notions of flowers as fragile beauties, Okoyomon instils this apparently bucolic setting with an ominous undercurrent.



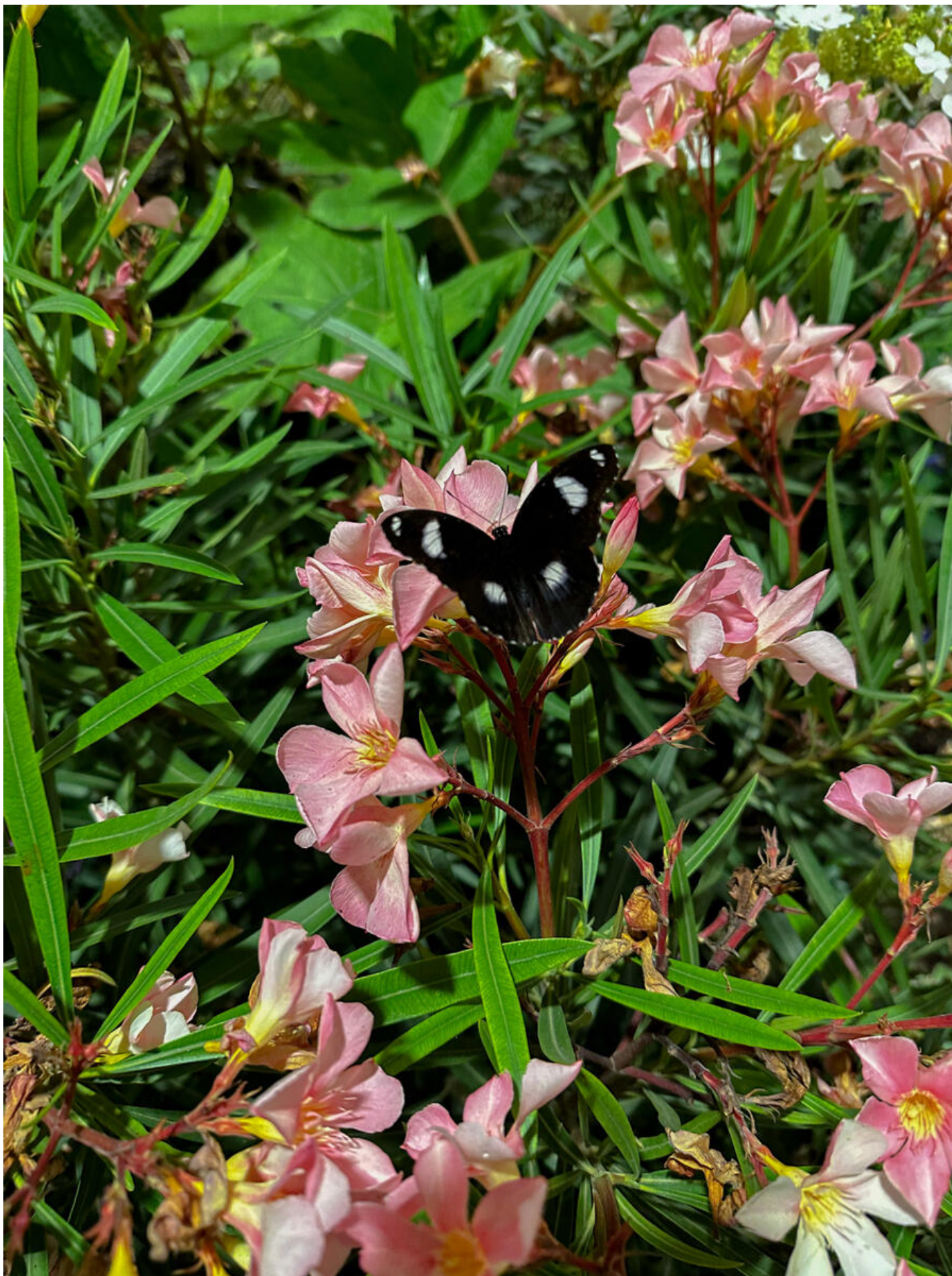
Precious Okoyomon, 'the sun eats her children', 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Sant'Andrea de Scaphis; photography: Daniele Molajoli

Jasmine, honeysuckle and other creepers make their way across the ancient walls, clambering around the altar, in front of which several majestic African lilies stand tall, vying for the sun. At their feet, amidst bushes of Nerium and Yellow Oleander, lies Beloved: a giant, animatronic brown plush bear. Named after the titular character from Toni Morrison's 1987 masterpiece, Beloved sleeps, its gentle snores giving way to a primordial chorus of screams –voiced by Okoyomon, fellow artist Okwui Okpokwasili and writer Saidiya Hartman – when it awakes every ten minutes. The penetrating shrieks feel impossibly long, while the sensation of chaos and helplessness is heightened by the dramatic strings of cellist Kelsey Lu's hypnotic symphony composed for the exhibition. There is a mischievousness here, too: from the absurd white ribbon tied girlishly around Beloved's head to the white lace underwear resembling a giant nappy to the violent suddenness of the scream, which made at least two visitors jump and run outside, as though fleeing a malevolent spectre.



Precious Okoyomon, 'the sun eats her children', 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Sant'Andrea de Scaphis; photography: Daniele Molajoli

Flitting amongst this prolific and messy cross-section of tropical habitat are tens of gorgeous, large, Latin American butterflies of different species – all with black morphology – the most stunning of which have wings tinged in iridescent blue. These butterflies are the reason for the intoxicating humidity, which is vital to their survival. They are born, will reproduce and die inside the church, their lives averaging around two weeks or possibly longer in this butterfly paradise teeming with food and free from predators. Titled *The Sky Is Always Black, Fort Mose* (2022), the inclusion of these insects references an 18th-century former Spanish fortress colony in St. Augustine, Florida, which was the first free Black settlement of its kind: a refuge for runaway slaves who were granted asylum in exchange for converting to Catholicism and serving four years in the Spanish militia. The black butterflies, which feed on the poisonous plants, thus become a lyrical metaphor for the plight and resilience of fugitive slaves.



Precious Okoyomon, 'the sun eats her children', 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Sant'Andrea de Scaphis; photography: Daniele Molajoli

More than a month since it opened, Okoyomon's installation continues to flourish unchecked: some plants thrive, others have completed their life cycle and at least two generations of majestic butterflies have lived entire lifetimes. Nature, we infer, is not some linear progression, with a clear beginning, middle and end, but an intersection of multiple cycles – a tangled, pulsating chaos in which life and death spill into one another. As the vines and creepers take over the church, it reads like a devastatingly poetic foreshadowing of a world without humans, nature its sole protagonist, resilient, finally reclaiming its land. But, also, there is hope. Nature's very ability to not only adapt but thrive in seemingly inhospitable places – like the wild horses prospering in the Chernobyl nuclear disaster exclusion zone – suggests that, if we listen and learn from it, if we allow ourselves to imagine a radically different order, life beyond the apocalypse might just be possible.

*Precious Okoyomon's **'the sun eats her children'** is on view at Sant'Andrea De Scaphis, Rome, until 16 September.*

Main image: Precious Okoyomon, 'the sun eats her children', 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Sant'Andrea de Scaphis; photography: Daniele Molajoli